Examples of Good and Bad Interpersonal Skills at Work

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A number of recent studies (Appleby, 2000; Johanson & Fried, 2002; Yancey, 2001) have found that the most critical job skill a new employee needs to possess is good interpersonal skills. Drew Appleby asked 39 employers what job skills were most important in making hiring decisions. Social skills ranked first. George Yancey asked 76 recent BA psychology graduates and 44 recent master's psychology graduates what job skills were most useful to them in their current jobs. Interpersonal skills ranked first. John Johanson and Carrie Fried asked 144 psychology graduates what job skills were most useful to them in their current jobs. Again, interpersonal skills ranked first.

Based on these results, it is easy for authors to advise undergraduates to seek out opportunities to develop their interpersonal skills. However, such advice begs two important questions. What exactly are interpersonal skills? And why are they so important? We sought to answer these questions by asking recent college graduates to provide us with some critical incidents of ways interpersonal skills had significantly helped or hurt them or their coworkers on the job. A small sample of their stories appears below. We hope that these short stories will help to clarify why so many employers and employees stress the importance of good interpersonal skills at work.

Please Elucidate

Jared was a new employee in an architectural firm. He had some ideas about how to improve the company's image with the customers. On his first attempt to explain his ideas at a company meeting, none of his words came out right. Everyone was confused. Jared asked for a second chance. Before his second attempt, Jared wrote everything out. He drew a diagram to help everyone follow his logic. He practiced his talk. His second attempt went much better. There was much discussion. People understood his concerns and suggestions, but the company decided not to implement his ideas. However, Jared's boss was so impressed with how well he communicated his ideas that he put him in charge of explaining designs to the firm's current and prospective clients.

Mini-Me

Allison used to work for the vice president of human resources, Reba. Allison was a human resources assistant. Reba was very pleased with Allison's job knowledge, hard work, and initiative. Reba used to tell Allison that her work was so good that, "You remind me of myself." One day, in an effort to compliment Allison, Reba says "I think I'll call you Mini-Me," and then does just that by calling Allison Mini-Me around the office from then on. Allison is understandably upset. She wants to be treated like an individual, not as an extension of her boss (or as Dr. Evil's sidekick in the Austin Powers movies). Unfortunately, Reba remains completely unaware of her subordinate's anger or why calling Allison Mini-Me is inappropriate. Subsequently, Allison leaves and Reba loses a great employee.

The Angry Customer

Jasmine works in the Elementary Education Advising Center at a state university. Part of her duties are to help enroll undergraduates for the next semester. One undergraduate was having a bad day and took her frustration out on Jasmine. Although she was being verbally attacked, Jasmine maintained a friendly demeanor, a helpful attitude, and a willingness to listen to the student's needs. This calmed the student, and Jasmine was able to reassure her that everything would work out. Subsequently, not only did that student make it a point to be pleasant to Jasmine in the future, but Jasmine's supervisor noted her excellent interpersonal and advising skills and passed on her positive impressions of Jasmine to others in the department. Sometimes the angry customer can serve as an opportunity, if you have the skills to take advantage of that opportunity.

The Gossip

Renee was a customer service representative at a phone company. She and her friends frequently e-mailed each other during work. Renee sent her friend Susan an e-mail about her coworker, Francis. She told Susan many unpleasant things about Francis. Unfortunately for Renee, she accidentally sent the e-mail to several people in the phone company, and they reported Renee's attack on Francis to Renee's supervisor. Renee was fired for her disloyal behavior and her poor judgment. In addition, Renee's e-mail friends at the phone company who had been using company e-mail for private use were placed on suspension.

The Helpful Coworkers

Russ was a new employee at a counseling center. He often needed help. Fortunately for Russ, his more experienced coworkers frequently came to his aid. They also offered him suggestions on how he could do his job better. No one told these seasoned employees to help Russ. They considered Russ as part of the team, and by helping Russ, they were helping the team, and ultimately, they were helping the counseling center provide the best possible care for the clients.

Don't Tell, Don't Ask

Lindsey got a job at a petroleum company. Her boss, Mark, frequently left his subordinates with not enough information to complete a job. For example, he told Lindsey to update the Anderson file the day he left for a weeklong training seminar. The company had over a dozen Anderson files, and most of them needed updating. Lindsey wanted to call Mark and ask for details, but her coworkers told her that if she did so, he would think she was incompetent and not "up to speed." Everyone searched for clues in Mark's office. Eventually, they were able to figure out the correct Anderson file. Although this story had a happy ending, Mark, Lindsey, and the other employees displayed poor communication skills. Mark should have left more explicit instructions. Lindsey should have called and asked for more details.

As we examined the stories, the following competencies emerged:

- Effectively translating and conveying information.
- Being able to accurately interpret other people's emotions.
- Being sensitive to other people's feelings.
- Calmly arriving at resolutions to conflict.
- Avoiding gossip.
- Being polite.

The interpersonal competencies expressed in the stories are the same kinds of competencies held by people with high emotional intelligence. In Daniel Goleman's (1995) book, *Emotional Intelligence,* he states that emotional intelligence is based on two critical dimensions: *self-discipline* and *empathy.* Regarding the former, he writes:

There is an old-fashioned word for the body of skills that emotional intelligence represents: character. . . . The bedrock of character is self-discipline; the virtuous life, as philosophers since Aristotle have observed, is based on self-control. A related keystone of character is being able to motivate and guide oneself, whether in doing homework, finishing a job, or getting up in the morning. (p. 285)

About empathy, Goleman writes:

Being able to put aside one's self-centered focus and impulses has social benefits: it opens the way to empathy, to real listening, to taking another person's perspective. Empathy, as we have seen, leads to caring, altruism, and compassion. Seeing things from another's perspective breaks down biased stereotypes, and so breeds tolerance and acceptance of differences. These capacities are ever more called on in our increasingly pluralistic society. (p. 285)

Good interpersonal skills, or call them self-discipline and empathy if you will, are more important in today's world of work than ever before because the nature of work is different today from what it was in our grandparents' day. Many writers (Bridges, 1994; Cascio, 1995; Howard, 1995; Ilgen & Hollenbeck, 1991) have pointed out that job

requirements are expanding, becoming more fluid and less set in bureaucratic stone. Originating in the quality movement in the 1980s, there has been an increase in the use of self-managed work teams. Another outgrowth of the quality movement has been an increased focus on servicing customers, both internal and external customers. Subsequently, today's employees are expected to possess the personality traits and people skills that will enable them to work well in teams (McIntyre & Salas, 1995), engage in organizational citizenship behaviors that help coworkers accomplish organizational goals (Borman & Motowidlo, 1993), and develop a customer service orientation (Schneider & Bowen, 1995). In other words, developing and using your interpersonal skills will be vital to your future success.

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